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ELOQUENCE

BY EDWARD A. THURBER

"SUCH a pity," says my friend, "such a pity" (we meet but once a year and thus our conversations overlap); "it is such a pity," he says, "that Webster ever won the Dartmouth College case!" And then he tells of Chief Justice Marshall's face and eyes,—“It is, sir, as I have said, a small college, and yet there are those who love it.” The tears rolled from those vanquished orbs; the cheeks glistened; the brain was on fire; the hand was loth to stay for paper,—“No,” the Justice proclaimed, “the charter shall not be changed without the consent of the corporation.” And this decision, my friend avers, has worked untold harm; it put up a bar to social progress.

Carlyle, in his denunciation of eloquence, risks a still higher flight; Demosthenes himself comes in question. Phocion's words had no wings, yet it was Phocion to whom the Athenians should have hearkened. “You cannot fight Philip,” he said; “you have not the slightest chance with Philip. He is a man who holds his tongue; he has great disciplined armies; a full treasury; can bribe you, with your idle clamorings; this man Demosthenes is simply tickling your auditory nerves.” Thus Froude treats Cicero in contrasting his eloquence with the plain speech of Caesar; thus so many treat Rousseau, that lawless, neurotic man whose resplendent utterance has befuddled us all. Was it Isaiah who gave his king such poor advice, or was it another prophet, or was it the way of prophets to be eloquent—and wrong?

Very likely the answer to these strictures on winged words is that eloquence itself is not at stake. The fear of eloquence may be like the fear of logic—no real fear at all. One dreads fallacy and one dreads liars who figure and turbulent men who declaim; and there the matter rests. And there I do not wish it to rest; I am irked by eloquence.

"In the main," asserts a clever man, "logic is not a productive tool so much as a weapon of defense," and he goes on to say that a wide experience of active intellectual affairs will lead most people to the conclusion that logic is mainly valuable as a weapon to exterminate logicians. "Logicians," declared Newman, "are more set upon concluding rightly than upon right conclusions. They cannot see the end for the process." And it is a joy to quote Newman approvingly, for he is at times, alas, violently fervid of speech.

How one might sit and ponder upon the crimes that lie at the door of eloquence, those flagrant words that stir men to belief and action! The man of rhythms breaks in upon the council, and because he stands well and waves well and booms well, he is listened to, and his advice is assumed as good; nay! the council leaps upon him, draws him to its bosom, and hails him mightily. The voice has melted; the look has subdued: is it because men are not reasoning animals?

If so, why should they hasten to employ logic to exterminate one another? What other animal ever does that! The heart of the difficulty appears to be that as men circumscribe the other animals in their range of emotions—to which, indeed, they give fantastic names—so are they superior to the lower animals in a possession all their own—that of reason. Occasionally one arises who is proud of this possession and makes good use of it, but for the most part men are content to let it lie fallow, to soothe themselves with rhythmic words. Thus it comes about that as logic is employed mainly as a weapon to exterminate logicians so is eloquence employed mainly as an artifice to supplant reason.

"Eloquence is the power of magnifying what is small and diminishing what is great." This saying of an "old man eloquent," Emerson characterizes as acute but partial. Yet his own fleet definitions do not put the mind so at rest. "Nothing but great weight in things," he declares, "can afford a quite literal speech," and proceeds forthwith to cloud this shaft of light with a "God himself does not speak prose." "What must have been the discourse of St. Bernard," exclaims Emerson, and we echo—what must it have been, indeed!—"when mothers hid their sons, wives their husbands, companions their friends, lest they should

be led by his eloquence to join the monastery!" A few pages further on Emerson ascribes it as a merit in Lincoln that when he rose to a height of thought or of passion he came down to a language level with the ear of all his audience. Was not Lincoln handling things of great weight, and was not St. Bernard magnifying what was small! But Emerson's contradictions simply mark him as the playfellow of eloquence; the rhythmic phrase was music to his ear—he could not forego its harp-like laughter—"Give me health and a day and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous."

To me the ancient apothegm is not only acute but final; it explains the modicum of pleasure and the grievous anguish engendered by the winged word. Eloquence is at home only in the mid-regions; it is the child, the spoiled child, of commonplace. What if I had even called it the carrion about which vultures congregate! The great writers—I mean the very great—never employ eloquence for their finest thoughts, only for their seconds. They dandle it upon their knees, they chuck it, smooth out its pout, and whisk it away with them, it may be to some ghoul-haunted woodland, some misty mid-region of faerie. But never, when they are divinely serious or superbly imaginative, do they take any thought of this wilful baggage.

And as eloquence is a sort of vent for the after-thoughts of the great, so is it pasture, the sufficient feeding ground for all other writers and speakers, ranking from the small grubs who snatch disputed morsels, the burly pillagers who roar their stage thunder, even to those who tread on the very edges of the uplands where the browsing is no longer coarse and lush.

"It was that time of year," said Henry James in words that I do not remember; it was that period, that phase of Victorianism when the sea was called upon incontinently to roll. Yet it was not, of course, the verb that carried the eloquence so much as the state of mind and the preposition, "on." The sea could roll well enough of itself, but when one invoked it to "roll on," the motion was perpetuated to eternity. Thus in the lines of our most eloquent poet, Joaquin Miller, Columbus did not command his mutineers merely to sail, but to "Sail On! Sail On!" Sailing became one with discovery. Milton thought that to write

poetry one ought himself to be a poem. Joaquin Miller ranged our western borders in long hair and high boots. Now these accoutrements are to the average man dispensable, but to pure eloquence they are imperative. And when you add to them a soft flowing collar, every word you utter will shake the hills.

There were, to be sure, about Byron certain neatnesses, a way he had of being at times plain and conventional that permitted him to rise into true poetry. He yields the palm of eloquence to Macaulay. Horatius, O Horatius, how well you kept the bridge! It took you seventy stanzas, but you did it; you achieved your purposes,—not quite, perhaps, in the fine Roman way; but with many a mid-Victorian gesture, in many a four beat and a three beat, in varied iambs and anapests, you rhymed your course; and the school boys, old and young, applaud you, for whatever you did and whatever you said, you epitomize the swollen longings of a decade of eloquence.

While Macaulay was beating the drum in verse and fingering tidy brass instruments in his essays and speeches, a contemporary, De Quincey, was in his music room, pulling out all the stops of the organ. De Quincey was one of the first among the moderns to devote to language the serious study toward massive and sustained effects accorded it by the Greek and Roman orators. To the latter, rhetoric was the art of persuading, and they put that art on its highest ground because they had to persuade, not a rabble, but groups and masses of intelligent, discriminating and sophisticated people. De Quincey was fond of the orators; he would hardly otherwise have described Burke as the "Supreme writer of his century." Yet, unlike Burke or Bossuet, he never had an audience before him, nor, like his successor, Newman, was he especially interested in persuading. De Quincey's subjects were literary and his audience cultivated readers. For them he bent his ear over his cadences, the rise and fall of his periods, and indulged himself in every variety of rhythmic effect,—*"the turn of the road carried the scene out of my eyes in an instant, and swept it into my dreams forever."* *"—as she rose and sank upon her seat, sank and rose, threw up her arms wildly to heaven, clutched at some visionary object in the air, fainting, praying, raving, despairing!"* This, I presume,

is polyphonic prose. De Quincey's vibrations have a much grander sweep than Miss Lowell's, but they are not so decorative, neither does he pursue them so consistently. For his final spring he often chooses an apostrophe,—“O noble-minded Ann!” “Oxford Street, stony-hearted stepmother, thou that listenest to the sigh of orphans, and drinkest the tears of children!”

“A bright, ready and melodious talker,” said Carlyle of De Quincey, “the finest silver-toned low voice—,” and this was the best that Carlyle ever said of his older contemporary. Of Burke he had spoken: “A man vehement rather than earnest; a resplendent, far-sighted Rhetorician rather than a deep, sure Thinker.”

De Quincey is the residuary legatee of the older rhetoricians, of those who had written impassioned prose in the two preceding centuries,—Raleigh, Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor, Milton. In speaking of one of them he defines rhetoric by stating that where conviction begins, the province of rhetoric ends; rhetoric is rather to excite admiration than to bring conviction; and De Quincey makes a distinction between what he calls eloquent passion and rhetorical fancy; one remarkable characteristic of Taylor's style, he notes, is the constant strife and fluctuation between his rhetoric and his eloquence. This, I imagine, is the use of eloquence that Matthew Arnold intends, when he speaks of “poetry and eloquence,” a use common enough and intelligible, but a use which seems to narrow the first word and to enlarge the second. Poetry often breaks over the confines of verse into prose, and the best poetry and the best prose are not eloquent. Even De Quincey who followed the stately phrase most assiduously, and who would not have followed it so far had he had more to say, could write haunting passages on the blending of moonlight and dawn, on a vision of the “wives and daughters of those who met in peace,” on a dream of Easter Sunday,—“I will walk abroad; old griefs shall be forgotten to-day; for the air is cool and still, and the hills are high, and stretch away to heaven, . . . and with the dew I can wash the fever from my forehead, and then I shall be unhappy no longer.” Here the style is rhythmic but not rhetorical; as I compare these quiet passages with his flights of eloquence, I am inclined to rearrange his words on Milton,—“Though for the most part he gives us eloquence for

poetry, there are times when he gives us poetry for eloquence," when the artificial yields place to the imaginative.

A writer who studiously cultivates his prose is like a fox leading the chase. His ear is atune to the least sound; he is partial to emphatic articulation; he reveres his labials. And yet the hounds are in full cry: he must be unobtrusive; he must scatter his scent or they will surely get him. They caught Landor; they lay hold of Stevenson; did they overtake Newman? I am not sure. They saw him, beyond question, but he was far off,—a swift and subtle fox; and he had a masterful way of doubling on his track. Besides, Newman was in earnest, and serious foxes are the most elusive.

There was a trait of Newman's style, however, a first cousin of this studied prose that was not at all elusive—I mean his eloquence. Now eloquence does not flame or cut or cry; it simply sounds the big drum or the snare drum or sweeps the double bass—there is no mistaking it. Newman did not mind these instruments. How contentedly he defends his Cicero!—"nothing more redundant in any part of his writings," says Newman, than certain passages from Shakespere, and he quotes at length speeches of Macbeth and Hamlet, beginning "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased" and "'Tis not only my inky cloak, good mother."

Newman continues:

No lover then at least of Shakespere may fairly accuse Cicero of gorgeousness of phraseology or diffuseness of style. . . . His copious, majestic, musical flow of language, even if sometimes beyond what the subject matter demands, is never out of keeping with the occasion or with the speaker. . . .

Neither Livy nor Tacitus nor Terence nor Seneca nor Pliny nor Quintilian, is an adequate spokesman for the Imperial City. They write Latin; Cicero writes Roman.

This flare of cadence provokes questions. In the first place, if Shakespere, a child of the Elizabethans, was gorgeous and diffuse, how much was at stake? Was he defending a city? or was he, like all those about him, in love with words? And for his greatest beauty and his highest poetry do we go to his redundant passages? In the second place, if Cicero wrote Roman, what,

pray, was Julius Caesar writing, and which of the two is the adequate spokesman of the Imperial City?

An admiring critic of a recent book of verse says: "There is no adornment and no eloquence; irony, indignation and vision are stripped bare, and speak in their immediate characters"; and another critic comments upon Robert Frost's poem, *The Runaway*: "Thought is provoked here rather than expressed, as thought is provoked by anything that really and quietly happens in the world." These poems address, then, not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but what Walter Pater calls the "imaginative reason." "Art," he says, "is always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception" . . . "the arts may be represented as continually struggling after the law or principle of music, to a condition which music alone completely realizes" . . . a "perfect identification of form and matter."

It would be strange indeed if, in the whirligig of time, Pater's definitions were directed against his own usage, if he should be the defender of a modern prose, careless of eloquence, careless of beauty itself, but which in its strife to marry thought and word should capture "the strength and resilience of fine steel," should unveil the secret of music; it would be passing strange if Pater's definitions should uphold free verse. It is as if the rap of Phocion's staff were more expressive than the periods of Demosthenes.

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